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Abstract

He knew he was kind but wished he were more assertive. So the way he had intervened over the girl surprised and heartened him. He had gone to his local electricity showroom to pay his bill and she was in front of him, at the window. The woman behind the glass was explaining that the electricity could not be turned on in her flat until someone settled the account that the previous tenant had left unpaid. The girl seemed to have no comprehension. She looked bewildered as she repeated what seemed to be her only words: 'I use no light. Why I must pay? I need light.' He noticed that each time she was about to say 'light' she had to pause. There was a moment of internal grappling before the word could be fetched up. The woman behind the window looked at him in appeal as she slid a form out to the girl. It was then that he had stepped in so masterfully. 'Wait one moment,' he said, gently moving the girl aside, his hands on her shoulders. He paid his own bill briskly, snapping his wallet shut after the transaction, tucking it suavely back into his inner pocket. He was conscious of something exemplary in his behaviour. Then he guided the girl by the elbow to the far end of the counter, out of the way of the other customers, to give her- and her form - his full attention.

ELIZABETH COOK

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He knew he was kind but wished he were more assertive. So the way he had intervened over the girl surprised and heartened him. He had gone to his local electricity showroom to pay his bill and she was in front of him, at the window. The woman behind the glass was explaining that the electricity could not be turned on in her flat until someone settled the account that the previous tenant had left unpaid. The girl seemed to have no comprehension. She looked bewildered as she repeated what seemed to be her only words: 'I use no light. Why I must pay? I need light.' He noticed that each time she was about to say 'light' she had to pause. There was a moment of internal grappling before the word could be fetched up. The woman behind the window looked at him in appeal as she slid a form out to the girl. It was then that he had stepped in so masterfully. 'Wait one moment,' he said, gently moving the girl aside, his hands on her shoulders. He paid his own bill briskly, snapping his wallet shut after the transaction, tucking it suavely back into his inner pocket. He was conscious of something exemplary in his behaviour. Then he guided the girl by the elbow to the far end of the counter, out of the way of the other customers, to give her – and her form – his full attention.

He had to coax the information out of her. Her name? Something oriental but he couldn't place it. Previous address? This was her first in England. Name and address of landlord? The form completed he returned to the window and explained, with some force, that it was clearly the duty of the landlord to settle the unpaid bill and that in the meantime the days were getting shorter and colder and the girl needed heat and light. If they didn't reconnect her that day he would report the matter to social services.

He invited her to a cup of tea after that. Not in his flat – though it was near – but at a cafeteria round the corner. He thought she had the most beautiful eyes, cased in neat lids, but it was her mouth that he found himself watching with wonder and delight. It was so full; like two soft pillows which would sometimes go taut as she half-whispered the words she was unsure of, only to relax again into cushiony fullness as she waited for his reply. He escorted her to her door and on the way pointed out his own. 'If you need any help at all – and if your lights don't come on – just knock. I'm usually there in the evenings.'

She called the following evening, carrying a cake as a gift, to say that her electricity had now come on and to thank him. He invited her to join

him in the meal he was about to make and after the meal he played records and drew more words from her about her life. A friend of hers had written that she would have work if she came to England. With the money from her job – which had something to do with paintings – she would be able to help her mother who was a widow and badly off. Her friend had found her the flat, but it was on the other side of London from her work and from where her friend lived. London was so big. Where she came from all her friends and family lived nearby.

Their friendship grew. Within two months of their meeting he had invited her to live with him; the pillows of her lips became his own mouth's resting place. He loved the small changes she brought into his life: fresh flowers on the table, scented sachets nestling among his clothes. And always there were cakes. She took a child's delight in colour and sweetness and she to him was a bright sweet thing. He could not believe his luck.

Her English grew with the acquisition of nouns. She spoke in captions rather than sentences, and the captions formed no commentary on the ideas they named. Lacking the grammar for opinions she simply labelled the items in her world: light, coffee, cake, love, more, kiss, please. He found this adorable and would teach her more: fern, hyacinth, percolator, nipple, penis, come.

He even helped her to find a class where English was taught in intensive three-hour sessions on Monday and Thursday evenings. He missed her on these nights but took pleasure in preparing a meal to delight her with when she came home. Her application was touching. She looked like a schoolgirl when she set out, clasping books and pens, her homework painstakingly copied in the script she had learnt to make with such difficulty. When she drew the letters it was as if she were drawing a plant, so anxious was she to get the lineaments right. The tip of her tongue would protrude from her teeth as she concentrated. At other times she would sit cross-legged on the floor, poring over one of her books and mouthing the words she found; she would barely breathe out the secrets she was taking in. He had given her a pullover – an enormous pink one of soft angora – and when she sat in it, so intent on her books, he would want to gather her up and crush her softness to him; his own little flower.

One evening he found her, not at her books but painting. It was summer and the evenings were long and light and she had set up an easel beside the window where the light could fall over her shoulder as her left hand worked. He came over and looked. There was a circle and in it were drawn crowds of figures. Men, women, animals, birds, trees – all crammed on top of one another. It didn't look natural. 'What's this?' he said. 'Are they making you take work home with you now?' She laughed. 'This not my job. This *my* work. This me.' Then she went on, dipping a fine brush into some red paint that she'd smeared onto a board, applying it to different parts of the circle. It was a funny way to paint; one colour at a time.

He hovered for a while, watching her. She seemed not to notice. 'Are

you hungry?' he asked after an hour or so. 'Not now,' she smiled. 'I eat sandwich before.' 'Well I'm starving,' he announced after a pause. 'I'm going to get something to eat. You sure you don't want any?' But again she was painting and didn't reply. He made a lot of noise as he got his meal ready. The cutlery drawer he dragged out with such violence that it fell, emptying half its contents onto the floor. When he turned on the tap to fill the saucepan the water bounced off the bottom and sprayed everywhere, soaking his shirt and trousers. 'Shit, shit, shit, SHIT. Why doesn't anything fucking WORK in this place.' She hurried over to see what was wrong. 'It doesn't matter,' he said sulkily. 'You get back to your picture.' But she didn't, and he was glad that she sat with him as he ate his meal. Later she unwrapped the foil from a cake she'd made and had some with him.

But she went on with her painting. All the times when she wasn't studying her English she was at it. The English he'd encouraged, helped her with – in spite of the fact that it took her away from him. Now, with this painting lark, it was like he'd given her an inch and she'd taken a mile. He hadn't thought she was like that.

Yet sometimes she needed his help. One day she came home later than usual and sank tired into a chair. 'For days I try to find this colour I need. I go everywhere and I say I need this blue and they say which one but I don't know how it's called in English.' And he had been very patient and very kind and told her all the names for blue that he knew and, since these were few, had gone to his thesaurus to seek out more so that in the end he recited a litany of blues: azure, cobalt, cyan, indigo, cerulean, perse, prussian, navy, sapphire, turquoise, ultramarine.

They meant nothing to her. 'How can I know from words? I have to see.' Never before had he seen her so passionate or urgent. 'This blue I need is very...' she paused to find the word, 'expensive...very...religious. When I put it in my picture it makes my picture...religious. It mean where the soul live when it...finished.' What queer ideas she had. He kissed the top of her head. 'Don't you worry little flower. We'll find your blue for you.'

She found it. She knew that the colour she needed came from a stone – a precious one. She sought out a gem shop and looked until she came across a piece of lapis lazuli. The name was propped up against it on a handwritten card and she inscribed it carefully in her notebook and also in her heart. Soon after she bought the paint she needed.

Her English had by now – as you will have noticed – greatly improved. She now had verbs, tenses and adjectives to articulate her nouns and make them move. Her language world had advanced beyond the material; her speech was no longer a matter of labelling. Able to understand more of what was said she began to disagree. One day a Salvation Army band was making music in the street. When she asked him about them he answered laughingly and she flared up. 'You always laugh and think you

are so special. Why are they stupid people to make their music to God? You always think other people and their clothes stupid but not you. You think I look funny. I tell you. When I come here I think you all with your big noses ugly.' He had stroked her blue-black hair and tried to soothe her. 'I don't think you look funny,' he'd said. 'I think you're beautiful.' But he was hurt. And that night he looked at her and he thought her eyes were snakey.

In spite of her growing vocabulary, they seemed to talk less rather than more these days. Her studying had turned into reading and when she was not doing that she was engrossed in her painting. As the words at her command multiplied and as, one by one, the colours in her painting were filled in, he felt that he was being progressively eased out of her consciousness. She still made cakes, she still brought flowers into the flat, but more and more he got the feeling they were for her, not for them or for him. In reaction he became sullen and unpleasing. He shaved infrequently and dressed defiantly in clothes he knew she disliked. When her absorption in her work kept her from eating he would make himself meals out of tins and sit hunched over the saucepan as he spooned them in. He lost his interest in culinary experiment.

The lapis blue was the last colour to be applied to the painting: the background to the riot of figures she had coloured already. As she laid it on, almost a grain at a time, the whole painting began to alter. Even he could see the change. Up to this point he'd thought the painting rather childish. Colourful and neatly done, it reminded him of the kind of Noah's Ark pictures you find pinned up in nursery schools. But the blue had embalmed the figures in a rich, other-worldly light. Their strange cavortings no longer seemed naive; these dancing figures were going somewhere – to a place he didn't know about. And as he watched her working, so still apart from her gently moving hand, he felt that she too was on her way to this other place whose language he did not know.

She sent the picture to her mother; not framed but carefully rolled in silk to protect it. Once it was gone she became restless and at a loss. She read less and watched television instead, shifting moodily between the channels, never seeing anything through. At other times she turned on the radio and jiggled about to the foolish music. It didn't suit her. She painted her nails. She cooked him meals. She got on his nerves. Sometimes as she sat there, absorbing all the crap that the television gave out, wide-eyed at commercials and games shows alike, he wanted to squash her stupid flat face. And the lips he had thought so wonderful now seemed blowsy and slack. He asked her what she saw in the programmes she watched and she said that they were new to her. She was learning. Why didn't she paint another picture? Yes, she said, she would. But she could not begin the next one straight away. The work on the last had tired her and for the moment she was resting.